

Theology vol 86.

THE
BISHOP OF DURHAM'S
SERMON,
PREACHED BEFORE
THE LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL,

On Wednesday, February 27, 1799.

March 1, 1799.

ORDERED, by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, in Parliament assembled, That the Thanks of this House be, and they are hereby, given to the Lord Bishop of Durham, for the Sermon by him preached before this House on Wednesday last in the Abbey Church, Westminster; and he is hereby desired to cause the same to be forthwith printed and published.

GEORGE ROSE,
Cler. Parliamentor.



A

SERMON,

PREACHED BEFORE THE

LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL,

On Wednesday, February 27, 1799.

K. *Barrington* BY
SHUTE, LORD BISHOP OF DURHAM.

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M.DCC.XCIX.

SEER MON

LODGE SPIRITUAL AND PHYSICAL



A SERMON,

&c.

LUKE xiii. 1—5.

There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilæans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.—And Jesus answering said unto them, suppose ye that these Galilæans were sinners above all the Galilæans because they suffered such things?—I tell you nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.—Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem?—I tell you nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

IT was our Saviour's manner to give a practical turn to every thing. Questions and occasions, which, by their own nature, and probably according to the design of those who introduced them, might have led to abstruse and mysterious
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speculations, drew from him unexpected lessons of duty, admonitions immediately applicable to conduct. Instructions thus conveyed, must have come upon the inquirer, and to the audience with a force, which we who read them now, feel and conceive very imperfectly, because we have not present to our senses and observation, those circumstances and realities, which gave aptness and impression to the answer, power and efficacy to the reflection.

When those about our Lord told him of the Galilæans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, they were expecting, as it should seem, to have this transaction theocratically accounted for; whether, for instance, it came to pass in the ordinary course of God's providence, or the effect of his special interference; for what end it was brought about, or why permitted. Our Saviour's answer also recognizes an inclination which then prevailed among the Jews, to interpret calamities into judgements in such a manner as to make no other use of the most signal disasters than to set on foot an inquisitive search into the presumed guilt of those who suffered them; and to apply, often, no doubt, very erroneously, always unsafely, their own exposition of the event to their own opinion of their neighbour's character. This temper (of which we elsewhere likewise
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in Scripture meet with intimations) received no encouragement from our Lord's reply. It stands indeed reproved by it. It is not justified by any knowledge which we are permitted to possess of the detail of the divine councils, nor by any information which we are capable of attaining of the actual state of other men's consciences ; and, above all, it is productive of no good.

Whether therefore they who brought forward the discourse fought by it to lead our Saviour into a general discussion of the ways and scheme of Providence, or to a declaration only of the specific reasons, which, in the case before them, had drawn down destruction upon the sufferers, they failed in their design. The divine teacher took up the subject exactly so far as it was of practical use to consider it, and no further. Omitting many explanations which might seem to belong to it, and which would better perhaps have gratified the curiosity of his audience, had that been his purpose, he delivered (and I think upon no occasion whatever with more solemnity delivered) an answer, which must have shaken the hearts and consciences of those who stood around him ; “ suppose ye that these Galilæans were sinners above
 “ all the Galilæans, because they suffered such things ? I tell
 “ you nay : but except, ye repent, ye shall all likewise
 “ perish.”

“perish.” Our Saviour who was wont, we know, to profit of every opportunity of seasonable instruction, does not stop at the instance which had been related to him, but adds to it another of his own; “or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt at Jerufalem? I tell you nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”

The doctrine which I consider our Lord as laying down by these examples is, that Almighty God in the dispensation of corrective evil, which he is pleased to carry on in this world, as it is connected with that dispensation which awaits us in another, out of many alike “concluded under sin,” alike obnoxious to his judgements, out of many who share in a common depravity, instead of destroying all, punishes some in order to afford a warning to others; that, if those others do not take warning by the example, they shall assuredly fall by the same hand; incur, not perhaps in the same manner, but the same destruction, as they have seen inflicted; that the thus taking warning to themselves is the proper, the intended use and application of every signal calamity which comes to pass before their eyes; and, lastly,

lastly, that in a religious view, this is the only use which we are authorised to make of them.

These considerations, which ought never perhaps to be long absent from our thoughts, are at this time brought before our view by the situation in which we are placed. Can it be necessary to remind any one person who hears me, that tremendous warnings have been given, and continue to be given to a careless age. A devouring fire is kindled upon the earth. All endeavours, I will not say to check, but to subdue it's fury, have hitherto failed. In what direction it's flames may next be carried, human foresight is not able to predict. They who are spared have cause to tremble. That sacred voice ought to be still sounding in their ears, "except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." With deep thankfulness indeed for the mercy by which we have hitherto been protected, and for the opportunity and space for reflection and amendment which have already been vouchsafed to them, still they ought to see their danger as it is: they ought to see, that, acting as reasonable men, they can neither dismiss their fears, remit their penitence, nor forget their vows.

A louder call, a more than ordinary alarm was wanting, nay seems to have hardly been sufficient to rouse the consciences of a generation brought by a long train of causes to something worse than a neglect, to a declared contempt of religion, and a fixed insensibility to it's concerns. What these causes are, it might not be difficult, if it were necessary, to explain. A form of Christianity exceedingly corrupt, and by it's corruptions liable to the objections of thinking men, and still more exposed to the sneers and shafts of infidelity, had obtained an establishment in many of the most powerful nations of Europe. The establishment of the Popish creed, however at first acquired, has been for many years continued on the part of the governments which have adopted it, and of the higher classes of men of the communities in which it prevailed, not from any opinion of it's evidence and truth, but from an utter indifference to all religious truth whatever. This appears for some time to have been the disposition of Roman Catholic countries with respect to the religion professed among them. It's effects upon those who conducted public affairs, or who ruled the public manners, were habitual insincerity in themselves, and a neglect of that attention, and of those provisions which are necessary to inculcate the principles of any religion, or to preserve its influence

influence upon the people. I am persuaded that Christianity can exist under no form whatever, in which it will not contain a great deal of what is good. Its lines are so strongly, so plainly, and so deeply inscribed on the tablet, that no injury can entirely efface them. But the want of belief in the truth of the public religion, considered as a system, produced a coldness and aversion towards every part of it; and not only so, but towards the name and thoughts of revealed religion itself. The consequence was, a general omission, or negligent application of those means by which what was good, and true, and of the greatest importance, might, though mixed, it is probable, with erroneous and unauthorized opinions, have been upheld in the minds and hearts of the people. Every thing, in the countries alluded to, operated against Religion. The lower orders observed in their superiours an ill concealed, indeed, a hardly dissembled contempt of the religion of the country; and no care that had been taken, no education that was given them, supplied principles which might resist the influence of these observations. This state of things can in no country last long; and besides the termination to which it leads, as it affects public institutions, it is sure to induce and leave upon the minds of men a spiritual deadness, a religious torpor, an unconcernedness, which it is extremely difficult to remove;
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and which it requires perhaps nothing less than some violent shock, to remove at all. It is true, that Protestant countries are not in the same situation; but it is far from being true that they have not felt the influence of the same causes; for that rejection of Christianity which found, not a just, but a natural excuse, in the multiplied additions by which the religion was disguised and deformed, diffused itself by dint of example amongst others, who neither had, nor could have the same grounds of objection. There are no persons in the world, who are more led by authority than unbelievers. A name, a reputation, acquired by science or by wit, although by science altogether unconnected with religious subjects, or by wit adverse to patient reasoning upon any subject whatever, is more than enough to decide the opinions of thousands who range themselves on the side of infidelity. It is well known how close and easy an intercourse is carried on between the higher classes of different countries, and that this intercourse often begins at an age, when every impression received from it sinks deep: so that prejudices, which, in the countries where they originated had too much foundation in religious abuse and corruption, passed over into countries, where, without any part of the same reason, they would produce, when once formed, very much of the same effect.

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There is another cause, which, in many reformed churches, and in none so much as our own, hath contributed to the generation of that religious insensibility of which we complain; and that cause is long tranquillity. Inestimable, no doubt, are the blessings of public tranquillity; but concern and anxiety for religion are not always amongst the number. God forbid, that we should wish the return of persecution, or of impassioned contraversion, for the sake of reviving religious sentiments amongst us; but it may still be true, (such is the weakness, shall I say, or the perverseness of the human mind?) that these sentiments languish and decay in a state of security and repose. While our bark goes before the gale, we are at rest. A storm, or an enemy, can alone awaken us. Religious sentiments have not the less foundation in truth and reason under one state of external circumstances than another, but they are less exercised, less called forth, less felt.

But from whatever cause or quarter this deep insensibility to the truths of religion hath proceeded, I fear I am too well warranted in asserting that it still exists. A series of visitations the most awful, of public calamities the most general, of political changes the most tremendous, which any age of the world ever experienced within the same period, have not

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done away our negligence in these most important of all human concerns. The successive fall of states and kingdoms, the ruin of establishments and institutions by which the order of civil life hath hitherto been maintained, the devastation of countries, the misery of millions, though events passing at our doors, under our eyes, amongst those with whom we are connected by society or alliance, have produced very little, if any, change upon our religious dispositions. The truth is, that whatever we may pretend, we are not affected at the heart by these things. No sufficient evidence, no probable indication of our being so affected hath yet appeared.

To judge fairly of this assertion, let us observe what the symptoms are, by which real anxiety, and genuine grief, invariably shew themselves; how men feel and act when they are indeed touched by calamity; and whether these symptoms accord in any degree with what in the present circumstances of public distress and peril, we see around us, or with what we perceive in ourselves.

When any great loss hath suddenly reduced our worldly substance, or any great danger threatens our affairs; when any disease hath destroyed our health; when death, sickness,

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or misfortune, visit us in our families or our friends, then are we universally affected, and, without question, sincerely. And what is the alteration within us which such sensations produce ?

Amongst other changes this constantly is one, that it takes away our taste and relish for public diversions. We do not prohibit diversions to a man under anxiety and afflictions. It is unnecessary : he enters not into them. He wants not to be laid under restraint respecting them : his abstinence is voluntary ; his mind being too burthened or too agitated for the enjoyment, and too occupied for admitting even the thought of them. There is nothing artificial or affected in this conduct ; it is the natural result of the state of his mind. I put, it is true, the case of sufferings and sorrows, the most personal, the most interesting, of any which we are capable of enduring. It is not to be expected that the view or even the experience of public calamities, can ever be brought so near to us as these : but in whatever degree we are truly impressed with concern or solicitude about them, in a proportionable degree the same effects will follow. But are these effects to be found amongst us in any degree whatever ? Is there any abatement, (I speak not now of its being extinct, or even suspended,) but is there any abatement of an eagerness

eagerness after pleasures and diversions? Are they less frequent, or rather constant, more chastised, or more sober than they were? Do men sacrifice less in pursuit of them, or suffer less of their time, and attention, and fortune, and study, to be engrossed by them? Do these things form what is their place and use, a relaxation from the business, the duties, the weighty offices of life, or do they not constitute that business itself? If they be now as profane, as loose, as exceptionable in kind, as exceptionable in degree, as they were in times of the greatest apparent security, yet as universally, as intemperately, and immoderately sought after, what other conclusion are we permitted to draw from this appearance, but that which we alledge, namely, that we are not, whatever we may for form's sake profess, affected in our hearts by the terrible scene which is passing in the world?

Again : there is one fault, for which anxiety, when real, is an infallible cure ; and that is levity of mind : and there is one way, in which this levity of mind, when uncorrected, is wont to betray itself, and that is, by an undistinguishing, and unreasonable passion for ridicule. I ought not, perhaps, to have called it an undistinguishing passion, because it commonly loves to attach, and exercise, and display itself upon those precise subjects, which are, of all others, the most improper

proper for it, and lie the furthest out of it's legitimate province. It is impossible for a man to be sincerely affected by any subject, and not to become, on that subject at least, serious. In truth, a real and rooted concern spreads a general seriousness over the whole disposition. Now a serious mind finds no entertainment in seeing made themes of ridicule, the sport of a playful fancy, or malicious wit, topics upon which it never meditates but with heart-felt trouble and concern. It invites not, it encourages not, this treatment of subjects on which it feels itself so deeply interested; but endures it with repugnancy and pain. I am not now describing the decorum which belongs to weighty and important questions, but the internal sensations of a mind by which that weight and importance is felt. Were I therefore to propose a test, by which it should be judged whether we are, or are not, affected as deeply as we ought to be by our public situation, I would fix upon this, whether, in the discussion of what related to it either in writing or conversation, we always or usually met with that gravity of thought and language, not only which is due to great and momentous interests, but which in fact we constantly do meet with, when men are truly in earnest, and truly solicitous about what they treat of. So long as the spirit of ridicule, prevailing as it may be, can find a subject in the disasters

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which surround us, and can be exerted on that subject with the success which it seeks, favour and approbation, so long I shall contend, that, say what we will, we are not penetrated by any due sense of the dangers to which we are exposed, or any such anxiety for our preservation and deliverance as the danger requires. If it be urged that this is to mark the public misfortunes by a melancholy shade, I reply by asking two questions; is levity, courage? Is seriousness, despair?

Once more; it is of the nature of every deep and anxious concern, I mean of what we actually feel to be such, that it diminishes our anxiety about other things. It excludes or overpowers a number of lesser cares, and comparatively trifling interests, which in a different state of mind and of circumstances, would have engaged, it is possible, much of our thoughts, our hopes, our fears, and our desires. One half of the emulations, for instance, and disputes in which we are involved; one half of the successes we boast, or the disappointments we complain of, are made to appear, even to ourselves, frivolous and insignificant, when we come to feel the load of any oppressive evil, or when we behold or contemplate its approach. The same is true of our relative advantages and distinctions; and still more of those futile decorations of life, the care to acquire or display which,
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takes up in ordinary minds, and in an ordinary state of those minds, no small part of their activity and attention. These things lose even their imaginary value when the spirit ceases to be at ease and leisure; are banished indeed from the thoughts, whenever the mind is fixed by any great concern.

But is there any alteration to be seen amongst us in these respects? Are we become less intent on trifles? Do we engage with less ardour in trifling pursuits; with less vehemence in trifling contentions? Are our personal cares diminished by our public danger, or rendered more worthy of men, who have the greatest of all interests on this side the grave at hazard, the fate of their country undecided.

Lastly; all sincere grief turns the heart towards religion. Great and imminent dangers do the same. In countries where the inhabitants are sometimes terrified by commotions of the earth; and where, when once alarmed, they have reason each hour to dread a repetition of the shock, every eye upon these tremendous occasions is lifted up to heaven, every soul seeks its creator. To him alone they sue for succour; to him alone they look for refuge and deliverance. Not only the wretched sufferers, but they who
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are witnesses to such scenes, or in whose neighbourhood they pass, participate strongly in the same sentiments. Most horrible, without question, are those disorders of nature; but hardly more destructive in the first convulsion, certainly not more pernicious in the eventual consequences than those civil distractions, than the fall, and ruin and confusion which have overwhelmed nations the nearest to our own. Yet we are not turned to God. No manifestation is yet given of that spirit of devotion, which I repeat again, almost every man feels when he is really affected by calamity; and feels almost involuntarily.

Is it then true that we are really affected, or in any degree corresponding with the extremity and occasion? If we be not, (and what have been mentioned are no slight proofs that we are not, and I wish I could state any sure proofs that we are) then have we new cause for the most serious apprehension and close reflection.

First; Do we presume to complain that God Almighty hath not heard our prayers, or to the extent to which we carried our hopes? Let us reflect whether it be true that we have prayed at all, with that earnestness in our hearts which constitutes the nature, which alone can expect the return,

turn, which alone indeed deserves the name of prayer ? It is not within the possibility of things that a man should pray as he ought, untill he know, confess and feel the magnitude of the object for which he prays, of the evil which he deprecates, of the danger which he seeks by prayer to avert.

Secondly ; if it be true that we are not affected by our situation, then, while we have reason to lament over the miseries of Europe, the wide wasting havoc which is still desolating her provinces, above even these have we yet greater reason to bewail the invincible hardness of our own hearts. “ What could have been done more to my vineyard that I have not done in it* ? ” What notices, what warnings, could have been given to us, which have not been given ? We of this country and generation may be said never to have known before what war was. We have been implicated in war, such as commenced too frequently, it may be owned, between powerful, jealous, and rival nations ; contests, that is, for small and distant portions of territory, or for claims of national honour ; we have seen also the severance of our empire ; but we have not before seen massacres and assassinations at our doors ; the rights and laws of property, that is, of peace, stricken to the root ; that tutelary shield, which legal

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* Isaiah v. 4.

government holds over infancy and age, weakness and timidity, dashed to the ground and broken to pieces ; the comforts of life torn from millions ; life itself preserved with difficulty, and under circumstances of extreme suffering ; we have seen these things, and yet are not affected. We have in many respects been objects of divine mercy, in no respect more than in having such strong admonitions vouchsafed to us. But despised warnings are the forerunners of penal justice. “ I
 “ will tell you what I will do to my vineyard ; I will take
 “ away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up : and
 “ break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden
 “ down ? ” *

Many who venerate religion, who see in a pure and holy faith the best resource in seasons of adversity and peril, the only remedy for the evils which threaten us, do not always consider, in what way alone we can expect, as a nation, to perceive its benefit, or draw down the blessing of its divine author. Religion is strictly a personal thing. The religion of Christ was so preached, and upon all occasions so regarded by its founder. Its effect upon communities, though salutary and important, is secondary and consequential.

* Isaiah v. 5.

tial. It promotes the welfare of states by it's influence upon the hearts and consciences of individuals. That influence must first of all therefore exist. To expect that Christianity can either save or sustain a nation in any other way, is to expect what it does not promise. And this shews the reason, why governments have not found that strength and support in religion which they have been taught to look for. Personal reformation is an exceedingly difficult task. It is easier to alter the constitution of an empire than to change a single corrupt heart. It never, perhaps, is changed, but by the all-powerful aid of God's holy spirit, and that aid presupposing or requiring on our parts, earnest, painful, and laborious endeavours. Now the reformation of a people is only the aggregate reformation of the individuals who compose it. Under what difficulties therefore it must always be carried on, by what struggles, with what contention of spirit, with what "striving together," with what mutual help and exhortation, with what separate resolution and perseverance, it must be finally accomplished, if accomplished at all, it is sufficiently easy to understand.

To conclude : while our religion dwells only upon our lips, resides in forms and in professions, although it may be
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celebrated in it's offices, and honoured in its rites, it will not, it cannot, in times and dangers like the present, afford us the assistance which we want. But let it become personal; let it's faith, it's laws, once sink into the hearts of those who assume it's name, and we will promise that our country shall soon rejoice in it's holy influence, acknowledge it's powerful energy, and find stability, where alone it can be found, in the protection of that Almighty Being who sent it to bless and save the world.



THE END.

